

# Jesus the Preterist: a review of R.C. Sproul's *The Last Days According to Jesus*

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**WHO IS THE FOUNDER OF THE PRÆTERIST VIEW?**  
**THE APOSTLE JOHN or JESUS THE PRÆTERIST**

As the conclusion of this millennium draws nearer, the apocalyptic anxieties of many are increasing. The Y2K problem in computer programming has further heightened this tension and, as always, there are those who believe these events to be the unfolding of biblical prophecies heralding the parousia of Christ. [2] Thousands of Christians are buying up books on prophecy and attending prophetic conferences in an attempt to discern the "signs of the times." Beyond that, hundreds of American Christian fundamentalists have moved to Jerusalem to await the end of the world, a problem so common that Jewish psychiatrists have dubbed it the "Jerusalem syndrome." Most of these are quietly awaiting the end, just as were their predecessors in the first century (2 Thess 3:6-12; cf. 1 Thess 1:9-10; 2 Thess 1:6-10). More radical groups, however, such as the one known as Concerned Christians, whose members were arrested and deported in early January, are actively hoping to hasten the parousia by planning mass suicide and violence in the Temple Mount area. The focus on the last days has always invited the imaginative energies of the eccentric, the charismatic and the sensationalist. [3]

In this atmosphere of increasing anxiety, potential violence and death, it is imperative that people calmly consider the specificity of biblical statements concerning the parousia, particularly the unequivocal imminency of that event in the minds of the NT writers. There is no question that Jesus and the apostles believed the parousia would occur within their own lifetimes. The supposition that this did not occur has caused among some a crisis of confidence in the authority of Scripture and the claims of Christ, as well it should. It is one of the great ironies in the rise of fundamentalism and subsequent evangelicalism that its distinctive emphases concerning the inerrancy of Scripture, grammatico-historical interpretation or biblical literalism, and the future second coming of Christ should in fact be so capable of being pitted against one another. [4] Simply put, if the expectation of Jesus and the apostles was for the parousia to occur within that generation and it did not, then the authority of Scripture, Christ, and the apostles are severely diminished. It is thus for apologetic purposes that the popular theologian R. C. Sproul has offered his own contribution to current eschatological concern. "Due to the crisis in confidence in the truth and authority of Scripture and the consequent crisis regarding the real historical Jesus, eschatology must come to grips with the tensions of time-frame references in the New Testament" (p. 26). Having recently stated a similar sentiment, I am grateful to see someone of Sproul's stature attempt to deal candidly with these tensions. [5]

The stated purpose of Sproul's book is "to evaluate moderate preterism and its view of eschatology" (p. 24). "Preterism" is a method of interpretation which has been gaining an

increasing number of adherents, though many may still be unfamiliar with it. "Preterists argue not only that the kingdom is a present reality, but also that in a real historical sense the parousia has already occurred" (p. 24) in the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in AD 70. [6] This is a view perhaps nowhere better demonstrated than in the 561-page book by the British Congregationalist J. Stuart Russell entitled *The Parousia*, first published in 1878, the second edition (1887) of which was reprinted by Baker in 1983. The value of Russell's very thorough treatment of the subject can hardly be overestimated, for it is one of the few works in the history of interpretation to apply the grammatico-historical method rigorously to the imminency statements concerning the parousia in order to show their first century fulfillment in the destruction of the Herodian temple. Sproul obviously recognizes the significance of Russell's book, for his own much briefer and more popular treatment is essentially a running dialogue with Russell featuring lengthy block quotes from his book.

The "moderate preterism" which Sproul advocates, however, is very different from the preterism of J. S. Russell. Russell's is a thoroughgoing preterism which sees all NT prophecy fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. Sproul's preterism, on the other hand, sees prophetic significance in that destruction, but still looks to the future for further prophetic fulfillment. By virtue of the fact that Sproul is in running dialogue with Russell on the extent to which NT prophecy was fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem, it seems evident that the actual purpose of Sproul's work is to show the validity of Russell's approach as it pertains to the Olivet Discourse while at the same time criticizing the what he terms the "radical" preterism of those who see complete fulfillment in AD 70 (cf. p. 202). [7]

Sproul's main focus, then, is on the Olivet Discourse. After Jesus tells the disciples that not one stone shall be left upon another, they ask Jesus as they look upon the temple buildings when these things will be and what will be the sign of their fulfillment? ([Matt 24:2-3](#); [Mark 13:2-4](#); [Luke 21:6-7](#)). Only Matthew includes their question about the coming of Christ and the end of the age. Sproul agrees with Russell that these events must be coterminous: "it becomes clear that if all three events are merely implicit in the disciples' query in Mark and Luke, these events are tied together in the Gospel of Matthew. The disciples' unambiguous question is a time-frame question. The disciples ask when these things will come to pass and what is the sign of Christ's coming and of the end?" (p. 33). He then goes on to cite Russell's work through the parable of the fig tree ([Matt 24:33](#)) as fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem, noting that the Olivet Discourse "contains a continuous and homogeneous prophecy regarding the coming destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, and the parousia of Christ" (p. 47). The paucity of reference in Sproul's work to the many other works, ancient and modern, which support the fulfillment of this pericope, plus his propensity to hide behind what Russell says, is disappointing and demonstrates little personal investigation of the evidence. For this reason, this article will provide some additional references to supplement what is lacking in Sproul's heavy reliance upon Russell. Sproul acknowledges that the signs which portend these events were all accomplished in the generation preceding the destruction of Jerusalem. The appearance of false messiahs and prophets, and warfare are all attested by Josephus and the NT ([Acts 5:36](#); [13:6](#); [21:38](#); [1 John 2:18](#); Josephus Ant. 20, 97-259; J.W., bks 2-3). [8] Eusebius reports the occurrence of famine and earthquakes throughout the region of Palestine during this time, as well as the persecution of the apostles (Hist. eccl. 2.8-26; cf. [Acts 7:59-60](#); [11:19](#); [12:1-2](#), e.g.). The proclamation of the gospel throughout the Roman empire also occurred at this time ([Col 1:5-6](#), [23](#); [Rom 1:8](#); [16:25-26](#)). The great tribulation and abomination of desolation refer to the Roman siege of Jerusalem, when the Roman armies entered the temple area with the imperial-eagle standards ([Luke 21:20](#)).

[9] The cosmic disturbances that occur at the appearing of the Son in clouds of glory immediately after the tribulation to gather his elect ([Matt 24:29-31](#)) are to be seen in the light of numerous instances of similar language in OT contexts of judgment (cf. [Isa 13:9-13](#), in the context of the impending "day of the Lord" [v. 6] judgment upon Babylon; [Isa 34:2-15](#), in the context of the "day of vengeance" [v. 8] judgment upon Edom; [Ezek 32:1-10](#), in the context of the judgment of the Lord upon Egypt through the king of Babylon; [Mic 1:3-5](#), in the context of judgment upon Samaria and Jerusalem). Cranfield's remark is apt: "That this is picture-language which we must not seek to compress into a literal interpretation should go without saying." [10] There are, however, exegetes highly admired among conservative interpreters, such as Herman Ridderbos, who think it valid to take this language as both poetic and narrative, both figurative and literal.

We must ask here whether, and to what degree, this is a literal description or a figurative prophecy. Jesus was speaking partly in the language of Old Testament prophecy (cf. [Isa. 34:9-10](#); [34:4](#)), where the catastrophic events that will happen in the realm of nature are portrayed figuratively; and His statement that 'the stars will fall from the sky' thus should be understood in that sense. These words are not entirely figurative, however. The events of nature that Jesus spoke of, however freely He described them, will indeed mean the end of the world and universe as it now exists (cf. [2 Peter 3:10](#)). [11]

One can only marvel at the hermeneutical duplicity at work here and the way it ravages genre analysis. By means of such a hermeneutic any text could be made to say anything. The recognition of genre types provides bases for how to understand a text. Seeing similarities in form and content to other texts enables the interpreter to view a text differently than if those similarities went unnoticed. By applying to the text the potential extrinsic genre-types, "the interpreter eventually determines the intrinsic, originally intended genre and thereby is able to utilize the correct 'rules' for understanding that text." [12] The elasticity with which these "rules" are applied to such texts elicits a problematic inconsistency vis-a-vis the parousia.

### **The Visibility of Christ at his Ascension and Return**

Sproul seems hesitant to grant that these cosmic cataclysms were fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem, as is evident in the concern he introduces over the manner of Christ's coming. If Jesus must come in like manner as he ascended into heaven ([Acts 1:9-11](#)), it "would seem to indicate that, if his departure in the glory cloud was visible, then his return in the glory cloud would also be visible" (p. 44). Sproul finds Russell's statement that Christ's return must be "visible and personal" to be "somewhat terse and less than satisfying" (p. 46). This being so, why does not Sproul interact with how other preterists have handled this and other texts dealing with the supposed "personal and visible" return of Christ? As important as Russell's book is to preterist thought, it is certainly not the final word and no one has bound Sproul to rely exclusively on it. From his citation of Ed Stevens' response to Kenneth Gentry's critique of preterism, which cites my book *Coming in the Clouds* on this text, Sproul is aware of other treatments of this text that might be evaluated. [13] His reluctance to do anything more than depend on Russell is itself "less than satisfying."

Although the interested reader may consult my *Coming in the Clouds* (pp. 249-258) for a fuller discussion of the Lukan material on the ascension, a few words on [Acts 1:9-11](#) must here be allowed. It is first to be noted that the present active participle of *blepo* in v. 9 is, according to BAGD (s.v., "blepo" 1b), used abstractly, i.e., there was no object at which the disciples were looking; thus it may well mean simply "in their sight," as in 1 Clem. 25:4. Jesus is then said to have been "lifted up" (*paerthae*), which in its passive form figuratively connotes the lifting up

of someone in stature or dignity. The only other use of this word cited in BAGD (s.v. "παύω," 2a), 1 Clem 45:8, does not denote a literal and physical elevation of the person, but instead describes the exaltation of someone. "It would be a grave misunderstanding of Luke's mind and purpose to regard his account of the Ascension of Christ as other than symbolic and poetic. He is not describing an act of levitation." [14]

The similarities between the account of Moses' departure in Josephus (Ant. 4.8.48) and Jesus' ascension are striking: the event occurs amongst followers on top of a mountain and, while the leader is addressing his company, a cloud suddenly overshadows him and he disappears, vanishing out of their sight. The similarities to the account of Elijah's departure are also worth noting ([2 Kgs 2:9-12](#)), where again, while the teacher speaks with his pupil(s), a stormcloud sweeps down and takes him away on the vehicle associated with the divine presence, signifying his exaltation with God. As with Elijah and the tradition of Moses, while the disciples were looking on, a cloud suddenly came down and completely enveloped their master, removing him from their sight. The cloud, of course, symbolizes the divine glory of God which must always be hidden from humanity due to its incapacity to see God in his unveiled splendor. Sproul says, "That Jesus ascended in a cloud suggests the presence of the Shekinah, which is manifest glory and splendor" (p. 46). The Shekinah (Heb., presence) was always veiled within the cloud, however, since no man can see the glory of God and live. The manifestation, then, was the cloud, hiding the splendor which would destroy any in its midst. Guthrie rightly notes, "the focus falls on the screening cloud, precisely as it does in the transfiguration account." [15] Perhaps the traditions surrounding the exaltation of Moses and Elijah were at play in their involvement with Jesus at his transfiguration, where he momentarily unveiled his glory in anticipation of his exaltation. At any case, just as the transfiguration instilled great fear in Peter, prompting him to suggest building the three tents to shield him, James, and John from the splendor they could not bear, [16] so the splendor of the risen Christ at his ascension would have required the veil of the cloud to shield the disciples from the glory they could not bear. Thus he was hidden in the cloud while he was exalted in glory. "In the same manner" he would come again ([Acts 1:11](#)). If, as Blaiklock says of understanding the ascension, "some of the difficulty encountered arises from an over-literal interpretation," [17] the same may be said of understanding the manner of Christ's return.

### **This Generation Shall Not Pass Away Till All Be Fulfilled**

Sproul admits that it is "possible, if not probable" that the words "this generation shall not pass away till all these things be accomplished" ([Matt 24:34](#) par.), coupled with a similar statement prior to the transfiguration ([Matt 16:28](#) par.), refer to those who would see the destruction of Jerusalem (p. 55). After a fairly extensive discussion of "this generation" (pp. 51-65), Sproul concludes, "If both 'this generation' and 'all these things' are taken at face value, then either all the content of Jesus' Olivet Discourse, including the parousia he describes here, have already taken place (in some sense), or at least some of Jesus' prophecy failed to take place within the time-frame assigned to it. Evangelical scholars have opted for some form of the former question, critical scholars for the latter" (pp. 64-65). [18]

Sproul believes that genre analysis will enable the interpreter to arrive at the true nature of the literal meaning of prophecy, which is filled with poetic language. Mistaking the poetic for the narrative and applying rules of "literalism" to it results in the crisis of parousia-delay. The problem of literal fulfillment leaves one with three options: (1) acknowledge that some of the discourse failed to occur, (2) interpret events of parousia literally and interpret the time-frame references figuratively, so that "this generation," for example, is stretched beyond Jesus'



contemporaries, or (3) interpret the time-frame references literally and the events surrounding the parousia figuratively, so that all of Jesus' prophecies in the Olivet Discourse were fulfilled in the events leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. When he says another alternative is to see a "literal" fulfillment of the entire discourse within the time span of a single generation, one wonders how this differs from the third option, particularly inasmuch as Russell is the one cited for number three and Russell is an advocate of seeing complete fulfillment in Jesus' generation. This is the view Sproul labels "radical" preterism. Another method, which Sproul advocates, sees "an early primary fulfillment of prophecy (a partial fulfillment), followed at a later time by a secondary fulfillment (the complete or ultimate fulfillment). This he calls "moderate" preterism. "Moderate preterism, though it sees the coming of Christ predicted in the Olivet Discourse as having been already fulfilled, still believes in a future consummation of Christ and his kingdom, based on other New Testament texts" (p. 68).

### **What NT Texts Are Still Future?**

While Sproul agrees with Russell that "the end of the age" spoken of in Matthew (13:39-40, 49; 24:3; 28:20; cf. [1 Cor 10:11](#); [Heb 9:26](#)) entails the emergence of the church as the distinctive people of God at the end of the Jewish age in the day of the Lord's coming in judgment to destroy the temple, he still feels there is more to be realized in the distant future. Given the similarity in language and focus in these other NT texts to the Olivet Discourse, particularly the imminency expectation found throughout the epistles and Revelation (cf. the lists cited from Demar's Last Days Madness on pp. 86-89 and from Russell's The Parousia on pp. 103-104), this would seem a difficult distinction to make. Indeed, Sproul seems to grant that some of the imminency expectations in the epistles are best understood as having been fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem. Although he generally hides behind citations from Russell, he is bold enough to state in reference to [1 Cor 7:29](#) ("the time is short"), "Surely the Corinthians would not have understood Paul to be urging them to do something because the time is short when in fact it is thousands of years away" (p. 98). Again, in reference to [Heb 10:37](#), he says, "It is difficult to escape the conclusion that the author of Hebrews links the approaching day with the coming of Christ and says that both are close at hand" (p. 107). Of Phillip E. Hughes' treatment of [Heb 10:19-25](#), in which he suggests that the "day" (v. 25) is the final and consummate day of Christ's coming which is always "at hand," Sproul demurs, saying, "this line of reasoning begs the question. . . . This sounds all too much like Rudolf Bultmann's famous theology of timelessness, which removes the object of faith from the realm of real history and consigns it to a supertemporal realm of the always present hic et nunc" (pp. 108-109). Thus, in a chapter entitled "What Did Paul Teach in his Letters," Sproul seems to admit that Paul believed at least some of the church's expectation of the parousia was realized in the destruction of Jerusalem. This is apparently why his chapter, "What About the Destruction of Jerusalem?" (pp. 113-127) is placed after the one entitled "What Did Paul Teach in His Letters?" (pp. 93-109). Sproul speaks similarly in his chapter, "What Did John Teach in Revelation?" There he acknowledges the imminency expectation and criticizes the "disturbing" way in which a scholar such as George E. Ladd glosses over what he admits is "the simplest solution," namely the preterist position, for an explanation which foists "nearness" upon the church in all times and places. "If the controlling principle is that prophecy is always imminent, then time-frame references would indeed be meaningless" (p. 135). Robert Mounce's "straightforward sense" of "shortly" ([Rev 1:1](#)) as "the prophetic outlook [in which] the end is always near" Sproul rightly declares "literary gymnastics" (p. 137). [19] Kenneth Gentry has categorized the temporal expectation according to three word groups, *taxeos* ("shortly, quickly"--1:1; 2:16; 3:11; 22:6-7,

12, 20), *aggus* ("near, at hand"--1:3, 22:10), and *mello* ("about to, on the point of"--1:19; 3:10), which accent the nearness of the things foretold in Revelation. [20] Gentry's book *Before Jerusalem Fell* is an important contribution to preterist thought, since it convincingly demonstrates that Revelation was written prior to the destruction of the temple in AD 70 and was thus a prophecy of that event. Sproul agrees, saying, "If the Book of Revelation was written after the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, it seems strange that John would be silent about these cataclysmic events. Granted this is an argument from silence, but the silence is deafening" (p. 147).

Almost one hundred pages after he first demurred from the full preterist position because of "other New Testament texts" (p. 68), Sproul finally begins to distinguish between full and partial preterism. Instead of beginning with Scripture, however, his first point of departure is "preterism and the creeds" (pp. 156-159). For this section, he reiterates the essence of the Kenneth Gentry's critique of full preterism and Edward Stevens' response. Here I add my own thoughts briefly to their exchange. While Gentry maintains that no creed allows any second advent in AD 70, no creed clearly disallows it either. The patristic formulas which address the subject (Irenaeus, Tertullian) speak simply of Christ's coming in glory to judge the quick and the dead, as is also done by the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds. [21] Furthermore, Gentry's assertion that no creed allows any other type of resurrection than a bodily one should be reviewed in light of Harris's discussion. [22] The phrase "resurrection of the flesh," predominant till 381, could have meant either "fleshly body" or, more probably, the whole person, body and soul. In 381, at the second ecumenical council at Constantinople, the biblical phrase "resurrection of the dead" became normative. It was only in 1552 that "resurrection of the body" was admitted into the Apostles' Creed. The creeds provide the contours for determining orthodoxy, but there must always be some latitude in the interpretation of their wording and even openness to revision according to the Word of God. [23] In the words of the Scots Confession (chap 20), "As we do not rashly condemn what good men, assembled together in general councils lawfully gathered, have set before us; so we do not receive uncritically whatever has been declared to men under the name of the general councils, for it is plain that, being human, some of them have manifestly erred, and that in matters of great weight and importance."

When at last Sproul comes to the NT texts which compel him to refrain from accepting full preterism, he cites two key pericopes ([1 Cor 15:50-58](#) and [1 Thess 4:13-17](#)). The nature of the resurrection thus appears to be the main impediment to his acceptance of full preterism.

### **The Nature of the Resurrection**

Of [1 Cor 15:50-58](#), Sproul claims that the full preterist position "makes two strong assertions about this text: It refers to a spiritual resurrection, not a bodily resurrection; and this resurrection has already taken place" (p. 160). He then cites Russell, who, having asked, "Is a spiritual body one which can be seen touched, handled?," responds by saying, "We are not certain that the eye can see the spiritual, or the hand grasp the immaterial. On the contrary, the presumption and the probability are that they cannot." [24] From Russell's comments, it is clear that he does not deny the bodily resurrection, but simply sees it as a spiritually transformed body no longer generally visible to the physical eye. "It is not improbable that traditional and materialistic conceptions of the resurrection,--opening graves and emerging bodies, may bias the imagination on this subject, and make us overlook the fact that our material organs can apprehend only material objects."

[25] Sproul's criticisms of full preterism here fail to do justice to Russell's belief in the transformation involved in the resurrection body or to more recent treatments of the same criticism with which he is familiar. In his response to Gentry, for example, Ed Stevens says Jesus

"was raised with an immortal body. He was raised bodily, but not with the same kind of body." [26]

The point of difference between Sproul and Russell, as adherents of partial and full preterism, respectively, lies in the nature of the resurrection body. This is, however, a matter which transcends any particular eschatological scenario, as can be seen in the vigorous debate that emerged following the publication of Murray Harris's *Raised Immortal* (1985), wherein he maintained that Jesus' body was transformed at his resurrection into a spiritual body characterized by invisibility and immateriality, with occasional materializations in the forty days prior to the ascension for purposes of confirming that he was indeed resurrected. Norman Geisler in *The Battle for the Resurrection* (1989) subsequently charged Harris with being "unorthodox" and "neodocetist" in having ostensibly denied the bodily resurrection of Christ. [27] Geisler insisted that the resurrected Jesus was numerically identical with his pre-resurrection body, which was physical and historically observable. Harris eventually responded with *From Grave to Glory: Resurrection in the New Testament, Including a Response to Norman L. Geisler*, in which he clarified his position as exegetically sound, biblically defensible, and fully orthodox. [28] A series of review essays followed, some arguing in favor of Geisler's position (though almost all against his sensationalistic approach), others in favor of Harris's position. The difference between the two was perhaps best spelled out by Scot McKnight in his review article, "The Nature of Bodily Resurrection: A Debatable Issue":

So what is the difference between Harris and Geisler? Simply put, it is that whereas Geisler believes in the 'resurrection of the flesh' . . . Harris believes in the 'resurrection of the body' (or, as he prefers, 'the resurrection of the dead'). But surely, most will say, 'flesh' and 'body' are not that different. They are, however, as Geisler and Harris define them. Harris understands the resurrected body as a 'spiritual body,' fit for eternity; Geisler apparently understands the resurrected body as a 'fleshy, material, fleshly, physical body' in its essence. Put differently, Geisler is keen to emphasize continuity and identity between present body and future body; Harris emphasized discontinuity, exaltation and glorification. Geisler focuses on reanimation and Harris on transformation. [29]

The issue in the Geisler-Harris debate was not the bodily resurrection, but rather the nature of bodily resurrection. [30] Whereas Geisler emphasized the reanimation of the material continuity and identity between the pre- and post-resurrected Christ, Harris emphasized the discontinuity and transformation of that body.

As was mentioned above, the issues involved in the Geisler-Harris debate are not limited to any particular eschatological perspective. Nonetheless, full preterists have found much in Harris's work to support their view of the resurrection body. "The resurrection of Jesus was not his transformation into an immaterial body but his acquisition of a 'spiritual body' which could materialize or dematerialize at will. When, on occasion, Jesus chose to appear to various persons in material form, this was just as really the 'spiritual body' of Jesus as when he was not visible or tangible. . . . After the forty days, when his appearances on earth were ended, Jesus assumed the sole mode of being visible to the inhabitants of heaven but having a nonfleshy body." [31] From my own study of the glory of God revealed to humanity in the theophanies of Scripture and consummately in the person of Christ, I must concur with Harris. Since it is not possible for anyone to see God's glory and live, a glory which Christ in his resurrection resumed ([John 17:5](#)), Christ must have been immaterial and invisible most of the time following his resurrection, save at times to reveal himself in often unrecognizable ways to the disciples, who were sometimes

ensconced behind closed doors, for the purpose of verifying his resurrection. When he did so materialize, he would also have veiled the glory which no one can see and live.

In the days following his resurrection, Jesus was normally invisible to men, for his body, having now participated in his glorification, was spiritual and incapable of being seen except by the rest of the spiritual realm. The invisibility of his body also rendered his glory invisible. When, on the other hand, Jesus desired to make himself visible to men, he could do so in varying degrees of substantiality. Contrary to his pre-resurrection body, which completely veiled the Divine Glory from men, Jesus' resurrection body now participated in that glory and thus permitted the manifestation of his Divine Glory in reverse proportion to the extent of the materialization of his body to approximate his pre-resurrection appearance. That this approximation to his pre-resurrection body was not the norm, however, seems evident from the relatively infrequent appearances he made in the days following his resurrection, the way he generally does appear, i.e., coming through secured doors apparently out of nowhere (though actually simply from a different realm, that of the spirit), and the numerous instances in which he walks incognito among those who should have recognized him. [32]

Accusations of doceticism or gnosticism are totally out of place concerning those who affirm orthodox christology and yet see solid biblical basis for the radical transformation of the resurrected body. [33]

At issue in the discussion of the resurrection body is the continuity and identity of the one resurrected. Sproul acknowledges that, "to the extent that this glorification involved change in his physical composition we can speak of discontinuity. But the Bible lays great stress on the continuity of the body that was placed in the tomb with the body that was raised" (p. 163). Of course, the extent to which one accents "change in his physical composition" will be the extent to which one must fashion his thinking as to the nature of personal identity. Sproul admits that, "though my body is never totally the same from moment to moment, it is nevertheless substantially the same" (p. 163). If, however, the body is constantly undergoing change, how is it "substantially the same"? [34] What is it that determines identity through time and change?

Although Sproul does not provide anything more than a superficial treatment of this issue, it is fair to infer Sproul is maintaining the centrality of materiality to personal identity. Thus, the resurrection body must be composed of the same elements of which it was constituted prior to death: "it was not a body. It was the same body" (p. 163). Sproul would appear to hold to the view of many of the Church Fathers who saw the resurrection as a reassembling of the former parts of the human being. [35] Just as Christ took on human flesh and rose in the same flesh, so those in whom his Spirit lives will be revived in the flesh at the resurrection. The very flesh and blood which are now corruptible will be rendered incorruptible. "Those things which are subject to corruption and mortality, even the flesh and blood, must needs also be susceptible of incorruption and immortality." [36] The accent here is on the consummation of the Adam typology in Christ the Second Adam among all those endowed by the Spirit. [37] The Spirit's enhancement of the physical and material components of one's previous existence are considered vital to Adamic life and are thus viewed as pivotal to the resurrection of the body. Stephen T. Davis writes:

we should not be misled by Paul's use of the term 'spiritual body.' He is not using this term to signify a body 'formed out of spirit' or made of 'spiritual matter,' whatever that might mean, but rather a body that has been glorified or transformed by God and is now



fully dominated by the power of the Holy Spirit. . . . It is clear to me that Paul's view of the resurrection is a physical view. [38]

Material continuity with the person prior to death has certainly been the predominant view of the resurrection body throughout Christian history. Both the body and the soul of the one who rises are therein viewed as necessary to insure that the risen one is numerically the same individual.

Personal identity is thus secured when God recollects the scattered matter, miraculously reconstitutes it in a human body, and reunites it with the soul.

The problems attending the view of personal identity as a recollection of scattered matter are, of course, significant. The most obvious is the perennial concern raised as to how human material which has long since biodegraded into the dust and become part of the grass which is eaten by the cows which has been consumed by subsequent generations of human beings can be recollected. This objection, sometimes known as the "consumption argument," seems virtually insurmountable in the instances of digestion and cannibalism, where clearly portions of one human being have become part of another human being. The standard response to this objection is recourse to divine omniscience and omnipotence, but this is not very satisfying, inasmuch as it does nothing to resolve the objection and is essentially a God of the gaps (*deus ex machina*) response. Athenagoras' additional notion, that God has designed certain foods to be ill-suited to particular species, so they may not be absorbed into another but only pass through, thus shows the preposterous lengths to which the problem of cannibalism leads adherents of the materialist view, for it can hardly be admitted that human beings cannot digest human flesh. [39]

Another question which seems particularly problematic for the material continuity notion is the stage of human being that is to be resurrected and preserved for all eternity. Will it be the stage of the body at death with all its wrinkles and decay, or the stage after a terribly disfiguring accident? Generally some more pristine point of life is the stage that is purported to be preserved, but when is that? How will those who have had no such state be resurrected, like the aborted fetus? These are not trivial matters. Tertullian responded by saying, "any loss sustained by our bodies is an accident to them, but their entirety is their natural property. In this condition we are born. Even if we become injured in the womb, this is loss suffered by what is already a human being. Natural condition is prior to injury. As life is bestowed by God, so is it restored by Him." [40] Contemporary understanding of genetic disorders, however, would seem to militate against the easy notion that all disorder is "injury" to some naturally good condition--some disorders are congenital, transmitted from the parents and present from the moment of conception in the DNA. Tertullian's response also does not cohere with his insistence on material continuity, for the resurrection of Christ would indicate that the resurrected have the very same bodies they had at the moment of death and that, however enhanced, those bodies will retain the disfiguring characteristics received prior to death, as in the case of Jesus' pierced hands, feet, and side which he showed to the disciples ([Luke 24:39](#); [John 20:20, 25-27](#)). [41]

The responses given to these particular questions, together with others previously alluded to (e.g., why Jesus oft went unrecognized by those who should have known him, why he was able to walk through closed doors, and how he could have been glorified with the glory of the Father [[John 17:5](#)] and have remained unobtrusive to sinners) have not satisfied some throughout the history of the Church. Thus, a second major alternative as to the nature of the resurrection body was offered by Origen, who suggested the existence of a form of the body which underlay all the various changes throughout life and gives to the individual his personal identity:

Because each body is held together by [virtue of] a nature that assimilates into itself from without certain things for nourishment and, corresponding to the things added, excretes

other things . . . , the material substratum is never the same. For this reason, river is not a bad name for the body since, strictly speaking, the initial substratum in our bodies is perhaps not the same for even two days.

Yet the real Paul or Peter, so to speak, is always the same -- [and] not merely in [the] soul, whose substance neither flows through us nor has anything ever added [to it]--even if the nature of the body is in a state of flux, because the form [eidos] characterizing the body is same, just as the features constituting the corporeal quality of Peter and Paul remain the same. According to this quality, not only scars from childhood remain on the bodies but also certain other peculiarities, [like] skin blemishes and similar things. [42]

Origen here accepts the concept of the body as flux, expressed in his day in the Galenic version of humoral theory. He maintains that the body's constantly changing mass of matter cannot rise, since it is not even the same from day to day. He sees identity as preserved in the corporeal form (eidos), not in the material body. Bynum says, "This eidos is a combination of Platonic form, or plan, with Stoic seminal reason (an internal principle of growth or development). A pattern that organizes the flux of matter and yet has its own inherent capacity for growth, it is (although I introduce the modern analogy with extreme hesitation), a bit like a genetic code." [43]

Others, like Gregory of Nyssa and Hilary of Poitiers, took up Origen's views (albeit not consistently), as did John Scotus Erigena. "Produced by the coming together of the elements, which are an ontological level above it and therefore not material, our material, fleshly body is accidents or qualities not substance. Where John does speak of body as substance (ousia), he means an underlying pattern (like Origen's eidos) not a corporeal body, a collection of particles. [44] Thomas Aquinas followed in a similar vein; though his hylomorphism was based in Aristotle's form-matter distinction, it held that identity is based in the soul (form) which informs the body, the pure potency of matter: "it is more correct to say that soul contains body [continent corpus] and makes it to be one, than the converse." [45]

A full spelling out of the consequences of such a position--known technically as formal identity (that is, the idea that a thing's form or 'whatness' accounts for its being the same thing)--obviates the materialist questions of risen fingernails and foreskins popular since Tertullian. If the nature of body is carried by soul and can be expressed in any matter that soul activates (matter being pure potency), then one cannot hold that a person's body or matter waits to be reassembled after death. . . . Therefore, when the human being rises the body that is matter to its form will by definition be its body. [46]

The notion of a form or pattern which constitutes the nature of what something is to become also seems most in keeping with Paul's "seed" analogy ([1 Cor 15:37](#)). A seed is a package containing a dormant embryo and its food supply, both wrapped in a seed coat. Once stimulated to germination, the embryo elicits an energy and provides a genetic pattern that then becomes the plant by feeding on the food inherent in it. [47] This is, of course, a natural process which Paul is using as an analogy to the quite unnatural concept of being raised from the dead! The analogous thought would seem to be that there is a form or pattern that is energized; in the case of resurrection it is remembered by God and enacted for each individual at the moment of resurrection. This view seems most congruent with current scientific and philosophical understanding. Thus Martin Gardiner, long-time contributor to Scientific American, says:

God retains a person's pattern in his mind. When that person dies, God removes the pattern from the board (the universe), and replaces it, then or later, by putting a person with the same pattern on another board (heaven). Is it the same person? I maintain that we don't really know what this question means because we don't know enough about the

nature and the rules of God's game. In a final ontological sense we have no clear notion of what 'identity' means when applied to anything. Is an electron or a photon the same particle after it has moved from here to there. Is it like asking if a water wave is the same wave after it has traveled a few kilometers? No, it is far more mysterious. Quantum waves are not 'real' waves like water and sound waves. They are waves of probabilities, waves of nothing. [48]

Acknowledging that there are "very few atoms left from among those that were there a few years ago," physicist and theologian John Polkinghorne says, "The real me is the immensely complicated 'pattern' in which these ever-changing atoms are organized. It seems to me to be an intelligible and coherent hope that God will remember the pattern that is me and recreate it in a new environment of his choosing, by his great act of final resurrection." [49]

Interestingly, no less a stalwart of Reformed orthodoxy than Louis Berkhof seems to prefer the concept of a pattern:

We are told that even now every particle in our bodies changes every seven years, but through it all the body retains its identity. There will be a certain physical connection between the old body and the new, but the nature of this connection is not revealed. Some theologians speak of a remaining germ from which the new body develops; others say that the organizing principle of the body remains. Origen had something of that kind in mind; so did Kuyper and Milligan. If we bear all this in mind, the old objection against the doctrine of the resurrection, namely, that it is impossible that a body could be raised up, consisting of the same particles that constituted it at death, since these particles pass into other forms of existence and perhaps into hundreds of other bodies, loses its force completely. [50]

As long as there is some kind of physical connection with the old body, even if it is "a remaining germ" or an "organizing principle," Berkhof views his position as "a physical or bodily resurrection" and is confident to say, "God will not create a new body for every man, but will raise up the very body that was deposited in the earth." [51]

Dale Martin has apparently arrived at the same view from a very different approach. In his book *The Corinthian Body*, Martin has endeavored to understand the problems of the church at Corinth by means of a detailed examination of the Greco-Roman understanding of the idea of body in its human, political, and ecclesiastical manifestations. He notes how the idea of the resurrection of the "dead" (vekros) would have meant to them the philosophically ridiculous idea of the resuscitation of a "corpse," an aspect of humanity they considered incapable of attaining to the higher status reserved for the purer substances of the self. While there was much speculation as to the nature of the soul at this time, "most philosophers speak of the soul as if it were composed of some substance that we would consider 'stuff'--even if they would not say that it is composed of hyl\_, which is usually, and rather misleadingly, translated as 'matter'." [52] It was often thought that the soul ascended at death to the heavens. The Stoics conceived of the soul as "fiery matter" (flagrante materia) that will rejoin the essence of the stars. [53] "The moon signified for the older Stoics the division between the sublunar, earthly realm and supralunar, divine regions." [54] All of this is important for consideration, since Paul argues in [1 Cor 15:40-49](#) that the resurrected body will be "heavenly" and have a glory analogous to that of the heavenly bodies of the sun, moon, and stars. Jewish speculation clearly supports the notion that the resurrected righteous will shine with a glory like the stars ([Dan 12:3](#); [2 Baruch 51:10](#); [Wis 3:7](#); [1 Enoch](#) 62:15; [2 Enoch](#) 66:7; cf. [Rev 1:16](#)). [55]

It would have made sense to the people among whom Paul worked in Corinth to view the soul returning to the cosmic region that corresponded to its own nature and substance, a region oft viewed as composed of fire or ether. [56] These cosmic regions, the sun, moon, and stars, were termed heavenly bodies (somata; [1 Cor 15:40](#)), just as they are yet today. Paul's use of the idea of resurrection of the "dead" (nekra) contradicted expectations of the resuscitation of the corpse by arguing that the resurrection body will be as different from the corpse as a seed is in comparison to the full flower. "God gives it a body just as he wished" ([1 Cor 15:38](#)), one suited to heaven.

He then sketches a hierarchy of bodies. Initially he uses the term 'flesh' (sarx) to refer to these different kinds of bodies. In what is probably a descending hierarchy, Paul says that there is a different kind of flesh for human beings, beasts, birds, and fish (v. 39). One is here reminded of the philosophical commonplace sketched above whereby different kinds of creatures exist in different cosmic realms, each occupying a body appropriate to its own realm and composed of substances derived from that realm.

He then extends the argument to show that a similar hierarchy exists for heavenly bodies. Here Paul switches terminology and substitutes the term *soma* ('body') for *sarx* ('flesh'). This is necessary because he will later insist that the resurrected human body is analogous to the heavenly 'bodies,' which are not composed of 'flesh.' Paul himself believes that the resurrected body will not be composed of flesh (see v. 50). In verse 40, however, he is speaking of both heavenly bodies (for which the term *sarx* would not be appropriate) and earthly bodies (for which it would be). The switch in terminology is the first clue as to how important a physiological hierarchy is for Paul's own conception of the resurrected body. [57]

In speaking of the differing "glory" of the various heavenly "bodies," Paul is accenting the glory of the heavenly body received in the resurrection and contrasting it to that of the flesh (*sarx*).

"What human beings have in common with heavenly bodies is, in Paul's system, incorporation as a 'pneumatic body'--that is, a body composed only of *pneuma* with *sarx* and *psyche* having been sloughed off along the way." [58]

If, as Davis believes, "identity equals striking similarity plus uniqueness and divine intention," personal identity is maintained in the radical transformation of the body at the resurrection. [59] In what Davis calls "the modern view," a person can be given a whole new body at the resurrection and still be the same person who died. While similarity is generally stressed, this may be maintained through the pattern God remembers as he "gives [to each] a body just as he wished" ([1 Cor 15:38](#)). Although this is not the traditional view, "it does seem at least a possible answer to standard anti-resurrection arguments that ask how a body dead for, say, a thousand years can possibly be reconstituted." [60] It certainly seems to satisfy the issues involved better than those who argue so vigorously for material continuity.

### **The "Rapture"**

The other text Sproul finds problematic for full preterism is [1 Thess 4:13-18](#). Of course, the text is at least as problematic to him, since his futuristic orientation fails to do justice to the imminency emphasis of the book itself and to the apostle's contention that his contemporaries ("we") would be alive at the coming of the Lord (v.15). Sproul ridicules Russell's supposition that at the coming of Christ to destroy Jerusalem these things occurred in a spiritual and secretive way. "The Lord would descend with a shout, but Russell says nobody could hear it. The voice of the archangel is silent, and the trumpet of God is mute. Not only this, but the multitude of the rising dead were caught up invisibly into invisible clouds to meet the invisible, coming Lord" (p. 168). Sproul maintains that Russell's treatment raises severe questions of hermeneutics. He

believes one can take the Olivet discourse in a figurative way because the language is so similar to OT prophetic imagery. Paul's language in 1 Thessalonians 4, however, is "clearly of a different sort. Here the genre of the text makes it highly unlikely that Paul was describing an event hidden from earthly view" (p. 169).

Since it seems undeniable that this is apocalyptic imagery, it is hard to see how the genre of [1 Thess 4:13-18](#) differs from the Olivet discourse. Indeed, a major issue which Sproul fails to address is just how this text is related to the Olivet discourse? If the eschatological scenario and parousia Jesus predicted in the Olivet discourse was fulfilled in AD 70, where did the apostles get the notion of another, yet future, coming? Are we back to the old liberal portrayal of Paul as the real founder of Christianity, and the perennial pitting of Jesus over against Paul (and the rest of the apostles)? [61] What is "the word of the Lord" to which Paul alludes in v. 15? If it is not an invention of the apostle, it must have some foundation in the Olivet discourse. Surely the apostle intends to base his message in the teaching of Jesus. If, then, Paul is alluding to an *agraphon*, what he understood to be the teaching of Jesus on the subject, there cannot be wide divergence between this parenetic midrash and [Matt 24:29-31](#), [40-44](#). [62] Sproul thus has to admit that either Paul went beyond Jesus' teaching and invented a future second coming (and what else?) or that Paul is stating here in somewhat different terms the gist of Jesus' Olivet discourse, which he admits has been fulfilled in AD 70.

Because Sproul provides no analysis of the [1 Thess 4:13-18](#) pericope and I myself have done so rather extensively elsewhere, I will mention only a few points for consideration. [63] The fact that this is "the only place where a 'rapture' of God's people is associated with the parousia" should give one pause about how to understand the idea. [64] There is no precedent in biblical or pseudepigraphical literature for the rapture or assumption of believers in general. A rapture is only spoken of in the tradition with reference to exceptional individuals such as [Enoch](#) ([Gen 5:24](#)), Moses (Josephus Ant. 4:326), and Elijah ([2 Kgs 2:11](#)). Unless one is prepared to contend that Paul considered the Thessalonians (and the rest of contemporary Christianity) to be exceptional individuals on a par with [Enoch](#), Moses, and Elijah, there is simply no basis in Paul's Jewish background or the Olivet discourse for a general assumption of believers.

Given the unique nature of this Pauline doctrine in a letter which is supposed to correct eschatological misconceptions, it must be asked if it is appropriate to assume that Paul is here innovating a completely new teaching. Proper pedagogy elucidates the unclear by the clear, not by the unprecedented. Why would Paul have concocted a 'general assumption of all believers,' a doctrine which has no basis in any other Jewish or Christian teaching, in hopes of alleviating misunderstanding among the Thessalonians regarding the fate of their departed? It should rather be supposed that Paul is not teaching a general rapture at all. That this verse involves a literal rapture of believers is far from necessary, particularly in the light of 1 QM which may well form the conceptual background for much of this pericope. In the 1 QM xiv 2-17 hymn of victory of the sons of light over the sons of darkness (cf. [1 Thess 5:4-5](#)), those who have been preserved from death in battle praise God for their own victory over evil using the metaphor of assumption: 'raise from the dust for yourself and subdue gods' (vv 14-15). This metaphorical use of a rapture idea is also found in some other pseudepigraphical [sic] texts. 1 [Enoch](#) 96:2 asserts, 'your children shall be raised high up and be made openly visible like eagles,' and 'you shall ascend and enter the crevices of the earth' in authority over sinners. Here 'the righteous are assured of the reconciliation and miraculous protection' in the judgment upon sinners. [65]



These texts, together with others (e.g., TMos 10:8-9), demonstrate the metaphorical use of the assumption motif as divine assurance of protection and victory over evil in the eschatological conflict.

This "rapture," then, may well be understood as a symbolic depiction of the final battle of Christ against the powers of darkness which oppose him. The Thessalonians were troubled by their indigenous Greek religious milieu and the control the cultic gods and demons could exert over the fate of their departed fellow believers. Paul responds by declaring that Christ will come with those departed believers, demonstrating that they have been with him. Those who remain are preserved from the final tribulation and granted victory, i.e., "caught up" with their conquering king, and assured that they will always be with the Lord. This reading of the pericope, while certainly different from traditional interpretations, endeavors to understand the text in its historical and grammatical context, not jettison it off into an unknown future. While it does not in any way suggest the events that are depicted are "invisible," the events are only properly understood via the eye of faith, as is always the case in Scripture.

The explanations offered here for 1 Corinthians 15 and 1 Thessalonians 4 would appear to provide a sufficient basis for rejecting Sproul's assertion that full preterism's "treatment of the final resurrection" is "its fatal flaw" (p. 203). In these few pages more explanation of these issues has been offered than Sproul provides in his entire book. Those who offer no real explanations of the issues they raise should be cautious in rejecting the alternatives developed by others.

Sproul never engages the issues he raises against full preterists; instead he simply assumes the traditional position as impregnable. It is, however, because the traditional position has evaded these matters, either by failing to employ a thoroughgoing grammatico-historical exegesis or by resorting to dogmatic affirmations, that there is a growing reexamination of biblical eschatology. It is essential that this continue and that partial preterists seriously engage these and other issues which Sproul has largely overlooked. What, for example, is the basis for claiming that Jesus' coming in AD 70 was "a parousia coming of Christ," "not the parousia" (p. 158)? There is no grammatical basis for this distinction. Every time the word parousia is used in the NT with reference to Christ, it is used of the parousia, i.e., the article is always used ([Matt 24:3, 27, 37, 39](#); [1 Cor 15:23](#); [16:17](#); [1 Thess 2:19](#); [3:13](#), [4:15](#); [5:23](#); [2 Thess 2:1, 8](#); [Jas 5:7-8](#); [2 Pet 3:4](#); [1 John 2:28](#); [2 Pet 1:16](#) (Sharp's rule); [3:12](#); BAGD, s.v. "parousia," 2ba). Those who chide dispensationalists for "several resurrections" and "multiple judgments" should recognize that they themselves are subject to the same criticisms in their "multiple comings" of Christ. [66] It is hard to resist the conclusion that these "comings" are not exegetically-based, but rather dogmatically-based, in order to buttress a wobbly traditionalistic perspective. Moreover, even if one were to allow these "multiple comings," how can the one at AD 70 be invisible and impersonal and yet somehow be a type of a visible and personal future coming? These are just a couple of the ways in which the "rules" of genre and linguistic analysis are stretched in opposite directions, and finally broken, for strictly dogmatic purposes. Sproul's unwillingness to engage the issues in any serious way emasculates his early claim to "evaluate moderate preterism" (p. 24). He has instead relied on full preterism to achieve consistency in Jesus' eschatology (the Olivet Discourse and, apparently, some other NT parousia passages), but, in slipping into unproven futuristic assumptions on [1 Cor 15:50-58](#) and [1 Thess 4:13-17](#), has introduced tensions into the apostolic teaching which he not only fails to evaluate, but ignores. While his book is a needed corrective to the plethora of dispensationalist fiction cluttering the shelves of most Christian bookstores, it is also only a stepping-stone to a consistent eschatology. If "the last days according to Jesus" were fulfilled in the judgment on Jerusalem in AD 70, then the Church must

be reformed and always reforming according to the Word of its Lord so that its eschatology fits Jesus' teaching.

#### References

1. R. C. Sproul, *The Last Days According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998).
2. See, e.g., M. A. Kellner, "Y2K: A Secular Apocalypse?," *Christianity Today* 43 (Jan. 11, 1999): 54-60.
3. For studies of the movements surrounding the conclusion of the first millennium, see N. Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages* (London: Temple Smith, rev. ed. 1970); R. Erdoes, A.D. 1000: *Living on the Brink of the Apocalypse* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988). For more recent examples of the apocalyptic urge, see R. Kyle, *The Last Days Are Here Again* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998); G. Demar, *Last Days Madness: The Folly of Trying to Predict When Christ Will Return* (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1991).
4. The upheaval surrounding the Civil War effected a spiritual crisis amongst American conservative Christians, with the issues stemming from the emergent theory of evolution, the rise of biblical criticism, and the new social sciences combining with the socio-economic issues concomitant with increasing urbanization to cast doubt on traditional theological views. Accompanying this tumult was a recrudescence of adventism, perhaps most notably the respective movements spawned by William Miller and John Darby, accentuating the imminency of Christ's second coming. On this, see, e.g., E. S. Gaustad, ed., *The Rise of Adventism: A Commentary on the Social and Religious Ferment of Mid-Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974); P. Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992). E. R. Sandeen's groundbreaking book, *The Roots of Fundamentalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970) argued that the conservative theology of old Princeton was melded with nascent premillennial theology to give birth to the fundamentalist movement of the 1920s. Cf. also idem., "The Princeton Theology: One Source of Biblical Literalism in American Protestantism," *CH 3* (1962): 307-321. On the other hand, R. B. Mullin ("Biblical Critics and the Battle Over Slavery," *Journal of Presbyterian History* 61 [1983]:212) says the grammatico-historical approach to biblical interpretation was more in vogue at Andover than at Princeton, which favored the approach of Francis Turretin, "both for his stricter Calvinism as well as from their own reservations concerning the effect of an overly historical approach to exegesis upon the question of prophetic knowledge."
5. "It is time for the church to stop trying to rationalize texts that demand fulfillment within the generation of Jesus, for it does so to the impoverishment of exegetical method, the trustworthiness of Scripture, and the credibility of its own proclamation" (R. E. Otto, Review of C. L. Holman, *Till Jesus Comes: Origins of Christian Apocalyptic Expectation* [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996], *WTJ* 60 [1998]:163).
6. It is insufficient to say that preterism simply means "the Kingdom is a present reality" (as the sidebar on p. 24). Sproul's addendum concerning the parousia having already occurred in "a real historical sense" is vital, since others can speak of the kingdom as a present reality without thereby meaning that the parousia has occurred in "a real historical sense." C. H. Dodd could say, e.g., that the kingdom was fully present in the ministry of Jesus and that synoptic sayings pointing to future eschatological occurrences were just "husks" of traditional belief Jesus held in common with his contemporaries which could easily be abandoned. See W. Willis, ed., *The Kingdom of God in 20th-Century Interpretation* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987). Similarly, John A. T. Robinson took the parousia (and thus the kingdom) to be inherent in the events surrounding Jesus' coming in ministry and going to the Father in exaltation. In both of these theologians, the kingdom is viewed as fully present, but only at the expense of relegating the future aspect of eschatological expectation to the realm of myth and symbol. "The Parousia, or any other element in the myth of the End, becomes a distortion of the teaching of Jesus, at the point at which it is no longer a symbol, a 'sign', for the great 'henceforth' of the Gospel, but an event which cannot take place till after other events" (J. A. T. Robinson, *Jesus and His Coming* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979] 182).
7. If, as a standard hermeneutics text states, "the preterist approach sees all events as past" (W. W. Klein, C. L. Blomberg, R. L. Hubbard, Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* [Dallas: Word, 1993] 369), one may ask how seeing "all events as past" can be labeled "radical"? Past fulfillment is simply in keeping with the definition of the word, which comes from the grammatical term preterite, used in Hebrew, for example, of "a true past tense" (R. J. Williams, *Hebrew Syntax: An Outline* (2d ed.; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980) § 176. Use of the adjective "moderate," meaning "to avoid excesses and extremes, keeping within reasonable bounds," could imply that the preterist position is unreasonable or extremist. Sproul recognizes this, albeit rather late in his treatment (p. 154), where he says that "the word radical conjures up more than I wish to impose on any school of preterism. So it is probably better that I now modify my own descriptive language." Sproul concludes that full and partial preterism are the best ways to describe the two positions (pp. 155-156). It is curious, then, why he uses "radical" throughout the majority of his book. Pejoratives (e.g., K. L. Gentry's use of the prefix "hyper" in his "Brief Theological Analysis of Hyper-Preterism," *Chalcedon Report* 384 [July 1997] 22-24, and J. West's linkage with a heretic's name [[1 Tim 1:20](#); [2 Tim 2:17-18](#)], "The Allurement of Hymenaeus Preterism," *ibid.*, 17-22) abound in the discussion of preterism and do little to further understanding.
8. See also, e.g., R. Gray, *Prophetic Figures in Late Second Temple Jewish Palestine: The Evidence from Josephus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); D. M. Rhoads, *Israel in Revolution, 6-74 C.E.* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) 47-173; E. Schürer, *History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ* (rev. ed. by G. Vermes; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1973-86) 1:455-470, 480-513; S. Dubnow, *History of the Jews* (South Brunswick, NJ: A. S. Barnes, 1967) 1:737-795.
9. Eusebius sees in the destruction the fulfillment of Christ's prophecies (*Hist. eccl.* 3.7); L. Gaston (*No Stone On Another: Studies in the Significance of the Fall of Jerusalem in the Synoptic Gospels* [SupplINT 23; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1970] 460-462) says that Josephus and the Jews saw the 490 years of [Dan 9:24-27](#) fulfilled in the destruction of the temple, though their expected deliverance did not follow. It is generally acknowledged that the "abomination of desolation" is an idea derived from the desecration of the temple by Antiochus Epiphanes on 15 Chislev, 167 BC, described in [Dan 11:31](#), [12:11](#); [1 Macc 1:54-61](#); [2 Macc 6:2-5](#); see, e.g., Schürer, *History of the Jewish People*, 1:151-156. D. Chilton's *The Great Tribulation* (Ft. Worth: Dominion, 1987) is a good popular presentation.
10. C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Mark* (CGTC; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959) 406.
11. H. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987) 447.
12. G. R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1991) 150.
13. Cf. E. E. Stevens, Stevens [sic] Response to Gentry (Bradford, PA: Kingdom Publications, 1997) 38-39, 42, where he cites R. E. Otto, *Coming in the Clouds: An Evangelical Case for the Invisibility of Christ at His Second Coming* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1994) 252-258, 265, in addition to providing his own suggestion that "Josephus, Tacitus, Eusebius and the Talmud all record that angelic armies were seen in the clouds just before the destruction of Jerusalem. That was 'visible' evidence that Christ (the commander of the heavenly hosts) was present" (p. 39).
14. W. Neil, *The Acts of the Apostles* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1973) 66.
15. D. Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1981) 395.
16. Cf. R. E. Otto, "The Fear Motivation in Peter's Offer to Build 'Tre\_s Skaenas'" *WTJ* 59 (1997):101-112.
17. E. M. Blaiklock, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1959) 51.
18. The option of dividing up the Matthean rendition of the Olivet Discourse into two sections, one dealing with the immediate event of the destruction of Jerusalem and the other with end of history events associated with a final parousia, with [Matt 24:36](#) forming the "transition text"

between them (as, e.g., J. M. Kik, *An Eschatology of Victory* [Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971] 67-73) has hopefully been laid to rest by the recognition that the parallel in Luke 21 places events before the "transition" (e.g., [Luke 21:26-27](#)) which Matthew (e.g., 24:37-39) places after it and places events after the "transition" ([Luke 21:37](#)) which Matthew places before it (24:28). See Appendix 1 in Stevens, *Response to Gentry*, 53.

19. The citation from Mounce is taken from *The Book of Revelation* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1977) 65.

20. K. L. Gentry, *Before Jerusalem Fell: Dating the Book of Revelation: An Exegetical and Historical Argument for a Pre-A.D. 70 Composition* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989) 133-145.

21. The original form of the Nicene Creed and the received form of the Apostles' Creed have "erxomenon kr\_vai" (P. Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990 rep.] 2:60, 45, respectively), which, while literally translated "is coming to judge," clearly emphasize purpose more than time (present adverbial participle with the aorist infinitive) and could thus simply read, "will judge"; the received text of the Greek Church, however, adds "palin" to the Nicene Creed to strengthen the future idea (p. 57).

22. M. J. Harris, *From Grave to Glory: Resurrection in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990) 277-280.

23. Despite its universal acceptance and recitation, the Apostles' Creed contains at least one other "affirmation" that has been perennially disputed and variously interpreted, i.e., the "descent into hell." I have previously stated my opposition to its inclusion in the creed ("Descendit in Inferna: A Reformed Review of a Creedal Conundrum," *WTJ* 52 [1990]:143-150), and there are certainly other evangelical theologians who agree (e.g., W. Grudem, *Systematic Theology* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994] 594).

24. Russell, *The Parousia*, 210.

25. *Ibid.*, 210-11. Sproul thinks he sees "a marked change in Russell's exegetical approach" when coming to the Corinthian correspondence: "The time-frame adopted by Russell is not based on an explicit chronological reference, but on an inference drawn from Paul's words 'We shall not all sleep'" (p. 161). Russell's concern to understand the parousia and the attendant resurrection as occurring in the first century surely do not stem from [1 Cor 15:51](#), but instead from the specific statements in the letter which demand a contemporary event: 1:7-8; 3:13; 7:29-31; 10:11, which Sproul himself seems earlier to admit require a first-century expectation (pp. 96-98). Cf also [1 Cor 16:22](#). Indeed, in his attempt to criticize Russell, Sproul falls prey to his own words, for when he says Russell is making Paul predict "the resurrection will occur while he is still alive," so that "the resurrection occurred at least five years prior to the destruction of Jerusalem (Paul was martyred under Nero in A.D. 65)" (p. 162), he is imposing on both Paul and Russell a time element in this particular text that is not there.

26. Stevens, *Response to Gentry*, 23.

27. Harris, *Raised Immortal: Resurrection and Immortality in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1985); Geisler, *The Battle for the Resurrection* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1989).

28. Harris, *From Grave to Glory: Resurrection in the New Testament, Including a Response to Norman L. Geisler* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990).

29. McKnight, "The Nature of Bodily Resurrection: A Debatable Issue," *JETS* 33 (1990):380.

30. For example, G. R. Habermas, a proponent of Geisler's stance, sees it as "the issue of the nature of Jesus' resurrection body" ("The Recent Evangelical Debate on the Bodily Resurrection of Jesus: A Review Article," *JETS* 33 [1990]: 375), as does McKnight ("The Nature of Bodily Resurrection: A Debatable Issue," *JETS* 33 [1990]:381), who says, "This is not a battle for the resurrection at all; it is battle about the nature of the resurrection body."

31. Harris, *From Grave to Glory*, 142.

32. Otto, *Coming in the Clouds*, 247. In his review of my book, N. E. B. Hofstetter avers that there are "other explanations" for the ability Christ had in his post-resurrection state of passing through doors and disappearing suddenly from his disciples. The only one he offers seems based on the divinity of Christ with recourse to the miraculous, "that he could do so [suddenly appear or disappear] before his resurrection, as when he passes through the crowds to escape their hostile intent." Although he has the temerity to suggest that I am "in danger of slighting the humanity of Christ in favor of his deity," his comment suggests he might do well to consider how in his own position "Christ's pre-resurrection body shares in the nature of humanity" (*WTJ* 59 [1997]:338).

33. "So far from ceasing to be fully human when he rose and ascended, Jesus then embodied in his own person the full potential and ultimate destiny of glorified humanity" (Harris, *From Grave to Glory*, 414). "As the orthodox confessions all teach, the two perfect natures, God and Man, were joined together in the one person of Jesus Christ, never to be divided. From the point of the incarnation, the person of Christ is a perpetual union of the divine and human natures" (Otto, *Coming in the Clouds*, 137, with citation of the classic statement on Christology, the Chalcedonian definition of 451). For historic teaching on the hypostatic union, cf., e.g., T. Oden, *The Word of Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989) 164-194.

34. Sproul's two illustrations, that of the "scars that have blemished my skin since childhood" and "teeth that I have had for decades," however homespun, do little to validate "the real continuity" with his "former body." Because it is clear that the scars or teeth were not always there, he is really illustrating the change, not the continuity, that occurs in the body. Indeed, in the case of his scars, what has occurred may well be a replacement of tissue. "Tissue repair is the substitution of viable cells for dead cells, and it can occur by regeneration or replacement. In regeneration, the new cells are the same type as those that were destroyed, and normal function is usually restored. In replacement, a new type of tissue develops that eventually causes scar production and the loss of some tissue function. The tissues involved and the nature of the wound determine the type of tissue repair that dominates" (R. R. Seeley, T. D. Stephens, P. Tate, *Essentials of Anatomy and Physiology* [St. Louis: Mosby-Year Book, 1991] 84). In the case of teeth, the enamel, which "is nonliving and cannot repair itself," covers the living pulp cavity that is filled with blood vessels, nerves, and connective tissue (*ibid.*, 408).

35. E.g., Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 5.3-16 (ANF 1:529-544); Tertullian, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh* (ANF 3:545-594).

36. Tertullian, *Resurrection of the Flesh* 51 (ANF 3:585).

37. Cf. S. B. Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996) 250-254.

38. Davis, *Risen Indeed: Making Sense of the Resurrection* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1993) 56-57. While Davis's views are closer to Geisler's than to Harris's, he finds it "difficult to understand, then, let alone credit Norman L. Geisler's attack on Murray J. Harris, who defends a theory that seems to fit somewhere between what I am calling a bodily transformation and spiritual resurrection," since "it nevertheless seems to me clear Harris's views are orthodox" (p. 59n.)

39. Athenagoras, *The Resurrection of the Dead*, chaps 3-8 (ANF 2:150-53).

40. Tertullian, *Resurrection*, ch 57 (ANF 3:589-90).

41. In his *Sentences*, Peter Lombard used [Eph 4:13](#) to contend that each would rise with "the stature he had (or would have had) in youth," i.e., about the age of thirty, since that is when Christ died! (C. W. Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity*, 200-1336 [New York: Columbia University Press, 1995] 122. Much of this section derives from Prof. Bynum's very detailed historical account.

42. Origen, *Fragment on Psalm 1:5*, in Methodius, *De resurrectione*, bk 1, chaps 22-23, cited in Bynum, *Resurrection of the Body*, 64.

43. Bynum, *Resurrection of the Body*, 66.

44. *Ibid.*, 142. Among those Erigena cites in support of his view is Ambrose.

45. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Ia, q. 76, art. 3, translated and cited by Bynum, *ibid.*, 259.

46. Bynum, *ibid.*, 259.

47. This is, of course, discussed in any biology textbook; cf., e.g., J. M. Barrett, et al., *Biology* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1986) 718-719.
48. M. Gardner, *The Whys of a Philosophical Scrivener* (New York: Quill, 1983) 314.
49. J. Polkinghorne, *Quarks, Chaos, & Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1997) 92-93.
50. L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1941) 723. Cf. also A. H. Strong: "So long as the physical connection is maintained, it is not necessary to suppose that even a germ or particle that belonged to the old body exists in the new" (*Systematic Theology* [Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1907] 1019).
51. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 722.
52. Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995) 115.
53. E.g., Seneca *Consolation to Marcia* 25.3; 26.6; *Moral Epistle* 102.28-30, cited by Martin, *Corinthian Body*, 115.
54. P. Hoffmann, *Die Toten in Christus* (Munster: Aschendorf, 1966) 43-44. Hoffmann notes that the Pythagoreans also saw the soul ascending to the stars, albeit only temporarily, since it eventually returned to earthly life (p. 35). See also A. Scott, *Origen and the Life of the Stars: A History of an Idea* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991).
55. Cf. also Otto, *Coming in the Clouds*, 285 and the OT and rabbinic literature cited there.
56. Hoffmann, *Die Toten*, 44-51.
57. Martin, *Corinthian Body*, 125-126.
58. *Ibid.*, 126.
59. Davis, *Risen Indeed*, 134.
60. *Ibid.*, 113.
61. Most recently set forth by A. N. Wilson, *Paul: The Mind of the Apostle* (New York: Norton, 1997); against which, see, e.g., N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997); D. Wenham, *Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1995).
62. C. A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1990) 171; J. B. Orchard, "Thessalonians and the Synoptic Gospels," *Bib* 19 (1938):19-42.
63. See R. E. Otto, "The Meeting in the Air ([1 Thess 4:17](#))," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 19 (1997):192-212, which goes beyond what was said in *Coming in the Clouds*, 265-273.
64. I. H. Marshall, *1 and 2 Thessalonians* (NCB; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1983) 130.
65. Otto, "Meeting in the Air," 202-203. The latter quote is from A. Dillmann, *Das Buch Henoch* (Leipzig: F. C. W. Vogel, 1853) 307.
66. As, e.g., K. L. Gentry, Jr., *He Shall Have Dominion: A Postmillennial Eschatology* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1992) 285, 293, 277, respectively; D. B. Knox, "Five Comings of Jesus, Matthew 24 and 25," *Reformed Theological Review* 34 (1975):44-54.

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